



UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE
National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration
NATIONAL MARINE FISHERIES SERVICE
Northwest Region
7600 Sand Point Way N.E., Bldg. 1
Seattle, WA 98115

December 5, 2006

MARINE MAMMAL UNUSUAL MORTALITY EVENT NOTIFICATION AND REQUEST FOR INFORMATION

The National Marine Fisheries Service (NOAA Fisheries) Northwest Region (NWR) is initiating an investigation of a marine mammal unusual mortality event (UME) involving harbor porpoises (*Phocoena phocoena*) in Washington and Oregon (Pacific Northwest). The UME was declared on November 3, 2006 as advised by the Working Group on Marine Mammal Unusual Mortality Events (WGMMUME), pursuant to Title IV of the Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA). This notice is for Federal Beachfront and Resource Agencies, State Wildlife Agencies, Coast Guard and Local Government Agencies, in accordance with the National Contingency Plan for Response to Marine Mammal Unusual Mortality Events. At this time there is only limited information available but there does not appear to be an elevated risk to the public beyond the normal precautionary measures advised when dead animals are encountered in the environment.

Background

On October 23, 2006 the NWR Protected Resources Division initiated consultation with the WGMMUME regarding elevated numbers of harbor porpoises that have been reported to the NWR Marine Mammal Stranding Network as stranded in the Pacific Northwest. The WGMMUME reviewed the available data and advised NOAA Fisheries that the stranding events meet at least one of the seven criteria established for designation of an UME. These mortalities are unusual because there is a marked increase in the number of dead stranded porpoises when compared with records from prior years. NOAA Fisheries officially declared the UME on November 3, and authorized the NWR to form an investigation team and initiate a formal investigation of the event.

Since January 11, 2006, a total of 66 stranded harbor porpoises have been reported: two stranded alive and were immediately released back to the wild. Sixty-four were reported dead when first observed. Over 60% of the animals were collected and examined by volunteers with the NWR Marine Mammal Stranding Network. Laboratory results from the post-mortem examinations are still pending for a majority of the cases. The previous maximum number of harbor porpoise strandings recorded in the Northwest was 34 animals in 2003. There is an attached Word document that details the locations of these strandings broken down into Outer Coast Oregon, Outer Coast Washington, and Inland waters of Washington.


In light of this declaration and with the possibility that the event may continue, NOAA Fisheries will appoint an Onsite Coordinator who will be responsible for directing the



investigation. At this time the reason for the increased mortality is unknown and the primary task of the investigation is to identify the potential cause(s); this could include environmental factors such as: current anomalies, sea surface temperatures, toxic phytoplankton blooms, disease, or other factors. If you have environmental or other information that you feel is pertinent to this investigation please provide information or program contacts to Kristin.Wilkinson@noaa.gov or call 206-526-4747. If you receive any reports of stranded harbor porpoises (or other marine mammals) in your area please contact your local stranding network or Kristin.Wilkinson@noaa.gov or call 206-526-4747. Thank you for your assistance.

Sincerely,



 D. Robert Lohn
Regional Administrator
NOAA Fisheries, NWR